Self-assessment exercises: A comparison between a private sector organisation and higher education institutions

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Abstract

The debate as to whether public organisations should emulate private managerial practices in the light of contextual differences is a long-running one. The aim of this paper is to compare the way self-assessment processes have been applied in five public administrative services at a public university and in a private organisation. It examines self-assessment exercises, and illustrates differences and similarities between the cases analysed. Based on the case study methodology, the paper suggests that the same management model (EFQM model) and a similar process may be applicable to the private organisation and the public services, although differences exist between them. The results also show that the benefits, difficulties and success factors are similar in the cases compared but their emphasis differs. This paper expands the theoretical literature about self-assessment in higher education institutions and offers lessons for the public and the private organisations to learn from one another.

Keywords: Self-assessment; Quality improvement; Public services; Higher education; Case studies

1. Introduction

Self-assessment is a methodology for continuous improvement that an organisation can develop both in a total quality management (TQM) context or as an independent strategy. Organisations from the private sector (Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999; Ojanen et al., 2002; Samuelsson and Nilsson, 2002; Bayazit and Karpak, 2007) and the public sector (Jones, 1998; Fraser, 2005; Kanji and Så, 2007) have adopted this methodology.

Regarding higher education institutions (HEIs), quality started to gain importance in the late 1980s and early 1990s. HEIs began to worry about quality and develop TQM programmes (Rosa et al., 2001), or formal assessment processes, on a periodical basis (Hides et al., 2004). Models based on quality awards such as the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) model or models created for self-assessment in academia, have become an important tool to adopt self-assessment methodology for quality improvement in HEIs (Rosa et al., 2001; Hides et al., 2004).

The academic literature on self-assessment has concentrated on the study of quality awards models and their relationship with performance (Wisner and Eakins, 1994; Rahman, 2001), the self-assessment practice, process, difficulties and benefits (Van der Wiele et al., 1996a, b; Ritchie and Dale, 2000; Samuelsson and Nilsson, 2002; Ahmed et al., 2003),
and the development of a self-assessment tool based on the criteria of quality awards (Lee and Quazi, 2001).

Regarding self-assessment practice, process, difficulties and benefits, the literature has dealt with these issues mainly in private organisations (Van der Wiele et al., 1996a, b; Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999; Ritchie and Dale, 2000; Samuelsson and Nilsson, 2002). There are few studies analysing these issues in the public sector (Wilkes and Dale, 1998; Fraser, 2005) and in HEIs, which is why the comparisons have not been sufficiently explored.

Additionally, the literature has pointed out that there are differences in the level of use of some operations management practices between the private and public sector (Ring and Perry, 1985; Andreassen, 1994). These differences can appear when adopting TQM and also self-assessment. For example, some aspects of TQM, such as customer focus, are treated with less importance in the public sector (Dewhurst et al., 1999). Similarly, the emphasis on the criteria of the EFQM model varies: for instance, there is a tendency towards a higher focus on the enabler block from the EFQM model among private organisations (Eskildsen et al., 2004). Although there are some differences, the public sector can adopt private management practices, but they need intelligent adaptation and careful implementation (Voss et al., 2005). Similarly, HEIs may learn from private organisations regarding the emphasis on quality, low cost and high efficiency (Yang et al., 2007). These ideas show that HEIs can adapt self-assessment practices to their own environment. However, there is an important gap in research on the relationship between business and public education concerning how business practices affect public education (Ogawa and Kim, 2005).

Therefore, it appears necessary to find out whether private practices may be transferred to HEIs. In this context, some studies have analysed the similarities and differences between the two sectors as regards other practices (MacIntosh, 2003; Voss et al., 2005). Consequently, there is a need for research on self-assessment comparing the private sector and HEIs, in order to check whether practices may be transferred from one sector to the other, and if one may learn anything from the other.

The aim of this paper is to compare the way self-assessment processes have been applied by five public administrative services at a public university and a private small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME), by analysing the stages in the process, the benefits, difficulties and success factors, using case study methodology.

The paper begins with a literature review (Section 2) about self-assessment in the private sector and HEIs, and Section 3 covers the methodology. Section 4 describes the self-assessment stages, difficulties, benefits and success factors, and compares this exercise in the cases analysed. Finally, conclusions are presented in Section 5.

2. Literature review

Several empirical studies have been performed in order to analyse the self-assessment methodology, mainly in private organisations. They have analysed the use of self-assessment against quality award models, the stages, the approach, the benefits and the difficulties, and impacts on performance (Van der Wiele et al., 1996a, b; Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999; Ritchie and Dale, 2000; Samuelsson and Nilsson, 2002).

Similarly, self-assessment has also been analysed in HEIs. Davies et al. (2001) studied the EFQM model as a framework, which also addresses the challenges faced by universities. Based on case study methodology, the authors showed that the aim of the process was to identify strengths and areas for improvement as a method for improvement. Osseo-Asare and Longbottom (2002) described the status of TQM in HEIs using EFQM model self-assessment methodology based on semi-structured interviews. Similarly, Hides et al. (2004) examined issues in the implementation of self-assessment based on case study methodology. Finally, Clavo-Mora et al. (2006) found that the leadership and commitment of the senior managers of the centres are necessary in order to adopt the EFQM model. They create and disseminate the value of this management philosophy, set goals and objectives and create an appropriate organisation and the system to achieve them.

Private firms and universities can use models based on quality awards or academic models as a self-assessment tool. Regarding the former, mention must be made of the standardised quality models, such as the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award model in the USA (Kumar, 2007; see http://www.quality.nist.gov/Business_Criteria.htm), the EFQM model in Europe (Conti, 2007; EFQM, 2003) and the Deming Prize model in Japan (Kumar, 2007; see http://www.juse.or.jp/e/deming/index.html). For instance, the EFQM methodology as a basis for self-assessment is rapidly emerging in
the UK education sector (Osseo-Asare and Longbottom, 2002). In relation to academic models, several academic studies have developed measurement instruments for quality management applicable to manufacturing organisations (Flynn et al., 1994; Ahire et al., 1996) or to both manufacturing and service organisations (Saraph et al., 1989; Black and Porter, 1995; Grandzol and Gershon, 1998; Quazi and Padibjo, 1998; Rao et al., 1999; Conca et al., 2004). Both the standardised quality models and academic models can be used to identify improvement actions.

Also, universities can adapt models created for self-assessment in academia, such as the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) accreditation (see http://www.efmd.org/equis) and the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence for Education (see http://www.quality.nist.gov/Education_Criteria.htm). It is worth analysing those studies which have developed empirically validated instruments for quality measurement in HEIs (Owlia and Aspinwall, 1998), or for the measurement of administrative quality in universities (Waugh, 2002). In Spain, the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (AN- ECA) has been promoting the use of self-assessment methods for the implementation of quality systems in administrative services using a procedure similar to that used by the EFQM model (see http://www.aneca.es/modal_eval/evalserv_present.html).

Organisations may choose among various approaches to self-assessment: questionnaire, workshop, pro-forma and award simulation (EFQM, 2003). The most common ones tend to fall into three main categories: award applications, questionnaires and workshops (Ritchie and Dale, 2000). Regardless of the approach chosen, the generic stages for self-assessment are the following (EFQM, 2003): developing management commitment; communicating self-assessment plans; planning self-assessment; establishing teams and training; conducting self-assessment; establishing action plans; implementing action plans; and review.

Studies focusing mainly on private firms suggested that this process makes it possible to identify strengths and areas for improvement in order to develop an action plan, which could be linked to strategic planning, measure performance, involve people in developing a process improvement approach to quality, and raise the understanding and awareness of quality-related issues (Van der Wiele et al., 1996a, b; Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999; Samuelsson and Nilsson, 2002; EFQM, 2003). Ritchie and Dale (2000) found the benefits associated with the self-assessment process after studying self-assessment practices in 10 organisations. They included as benefits, amongst others, identifying improvement actions, encouraging employee involvement and ownership, raising understanding and awareness of quality-related issues, developing a common approach to improvement across the company, helping to refocus employees’ attention on quality, providing a “healthcheck” of processes and operations, and encouraging improvements in performance.

However, some organisations derive little benefit from self-assessment processes (Conti, 2001). This might be due to the difficulties that may arise. Ritchie and Dale (2000) pointed out, for instance, the lack of commitment and enthusiasm from the management and employees; the time-consuming nature of the process; not knowing where to start; and lack of resources. Other difficulties could be the lack of support (e.g. by the quality department) and the difficulty in implementing the improvement actions.

In view of all this, the literature lists several success factors, which help to overcome these difficulties and leading to successful self-assessment. Such factors are management commitment (Van der Wiele et al., 1996b; Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999; Ritchie and Dale, 2000; Samuelsson and Nilsson, 2002; Ahmed et al., 2003); employee involvement (Ahmed et al., 2003); open communication (Ahmed et al., 2003); training (Van der Wiele et al., 1996b; Wilkes and Dale, 1998; Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999; Ritchie and Dale, 2000); and the development and review of an improvement plan (Van der Wiele et al., 1996b; Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999; Ritchie and Dale, 2000; Samuelsson and Nilsson, 2002). Out of these researchers, only Wilkes and Dale (1998) analysed a public-owned corporation, although their conclusions were of a general nature and no comparisons were made.

Concerning these topics, studies on HEIs mentioned that the purpose of this methodology is to focus on the strengths and areas for improvement as a method for improvement, and also identified establishing senior level commitment and focusing on customer delivery as major issues to address in self-assessment (Davies et al., 2001; Osseo-Asare and Longbottom, 2002; Hides et al., 2004; Clavo-Mora et al., 2006).
Based on this literature review, these issues are evaluated, compared and contrasted in order to analyse similarities and differences between the private SME and the five public services. Thus, three research questions are formulated:

RQ1. Are the stages to success similar in the five public services and the private SME?
RQ2. Are the difficulties and benefits similar in the five public services and the private SME?
RQ3. Are the success factors similar in the five public services and the private SME?

3. Methodology

The case study methodology was used to develop the comparison and was chosen because it makes it possible to verify, illustrate and construct theory. Using this method, the theory construction process can be based not only on the literature, but also on the consideration of empirical observations or reality experiences (Carroll and Swatman, 2000). Case study research is defined as research that provides a detailed account and analysis of one or more cases (Johnson and Christensen, 2004) and the evidence may be qualitative, quantitative or both (Yin, 1984; Stake, 2000). The interest here is to show the results from six cases using quantitative and qualitative evidence.

Data collection combined several methods: interviews, surveys, direct observation, organisation documents and feedback from one private SME and five administrative services in HEIs. This way, the findings were validated by employing the triangulation technique, which reinforces the belief that the result is a valid one, and not a methodological artifact (Bouchard, 1976; Yin, 1984). Thus, during the research process primary and secondary data were obtained. The primary data were collected through observation (visits to organisations and contact with employees); interviews (six interviews with the person responsible for the Organisation Department, one employee in this department and top management in private firm, and eight interviews with the team members in each public service); and surveys with the person responsible for the Organisation Department at the private firm, and with the self-assessment team members in each university service. This information was used to analyse: the objective of the self-assessment and why it was performed; how the process was started; its stages, difficulties and benefits; and the success factors.

One of the interviews was supported by a questionnaire (measured in a five-point scale) on difficulties and benefits of the process, based on the work by Ritchie and Dale (2000). More specifically, attention focused on the difficulties and benefits identified above. Difficulties measured were the following: lack of staff commitment; time consumed in the process; implementation of improvement actions; support by the quality unit; lack of commitment by University of Alicante management; not knowing where to start; and lack of resources. Similarly, benefits were measured using the following issues: encouraging the improvement of service quality; creating awareness and knowledge of quality-related issues; creating a common improvement approach for the whole service; enhancing employees’ awareness of the importance of quality; identifying improvement actions; giving an overview of the service processes; and increasing employees’ involvement.

The respondents were the person responsible for the Organisation Department in the private SME and the team members in each public service. Before this interview, the questionnaire was faxed to the respondents to allow the individuals sufficient time in which to prepare their responses.

Secondary data sources included access to internal and external documents: self-assessment plan, written material produced during the process (e.g. forms containing strengths, weaknesses and improvement actions, forms containing action plans), objectives, indicators, materials from the training sessions, and the website. This information was used to supplement the primary data. Finally, in order to test the credibility of the interpretations of the data, the insights were checked on an ongoing basis with the informants, asking for their feedback. The member checks served to revise and hone the findings (Danneels, 2002).

The selection criteria were as follows: organisations that use quality as a strategic variable within its management, and conduct all stages of self-assessment suggested by EFQM (2003) in a successful manner. The company named Pikolinos and five services at the University of Alicante were selected because they fulfil these requirements.

Pikolinos is a private Spanish SME from the footwear sector, engaged in the sale, purchase, commercialisation and distribution of all types of footwear, whose purpose is to satisfy and live up to
consumers’ expectations regarding design, comfort and quality. This firm is committed to a quality culture, as proven by the certificates and awards obtained. It was the first footwear firm in Spain to obtain the ISO 9001 certificate, it has been awarded the ISO 14001 certificate, and has also received various domestic and international awards related to Total Quality, export and training, amongst others, from several public and private entities. They distribute and sell ladies’ and men’s footwear in 45 countries all over the world, and employ 100 people, plus 1800 indirect employees in 19 distribution centres. Pikolinos outsources production, setting quality criteria. More specifically, in 2004 its turnover was 55 million euros, and 70% of its production was for export. Table 1 reflects the characteristics of the five services from the University of Alicante (Spain).

4. Results and discussion

This section is divided into two sub-sections. The first one illustrates the self-assessment steps and the second compares the cases.

4.1. Case studies

The first case involves Pikolinos. Since its creation, this firm has focused on human resources, innovation and the continuous improvement of its processes. Its commitment to quality has led it to adopt new management practices in order to improve competitiveness, such as the ISO 9001 standard (in 1997), strategic planning (in 2001), the ISO 14001 standard (in 2004), and the EFQM model (in 2003 and 2005). Pikolinos carried out a self-assessment process to improve the firm’s activities in order to move towards excellence. Therefore, the motives for the self-assessment were internal ones.

The process started with the support of an EFQM licensee (external advisor) who taught a training course in late 2002 to the heads of department, and an initial self-assessment meeting in which the management team and the advisor planned the process and set up the self-assessment teams. This plan focused on defining the scope of activities and planning their development. This exercise began in February 2003 and finished in June 2003 (Fig. 1). Seventy-six improvement actions were identified (e.g. the whole management team must make a public appearance, document the review process of the strategic plan and revise the existence of procedures for the management of improvement teams). In December 2005, 69 actions had been fulfilled by 100%, and 7 remained to be completed before April 2008. Another self-assessment exercise was carried out in 2005, identifying 78 improvement actions. In September 2006, the firm started to draught a report in order to apply for a quality award in the future.

The other cases involve five services at the University of Alicante, which have taken part in the II Quality Scheme for Spanish Universities.
(approved by central government), focusing on the assessment of university degrees and administrative services. In the case of services, the University of Alicante quality manager developed a quality scheme aimed at assessing the University of Alicante services using the EFQM model. Under this plan, 10 services were assessed in the academic years 2003–2004 and 2004–2005 using a workshop approach, and 12 services in the academic years 2005–2006 and 2006–2007 using the questionnaire approach. The case study deals with the first five services assessed according to this scheme because the assessment took place simultaneously with that at Pikolinos. The assessment was carried out in three stages: internal assessment or self-assessment, from late 2002 to September 2003 (the team members prepared a report based on EFQM criteria, in such a way that for each criterion, the team members showed the situation of the service and listed a number of strengths, weaknesses and improvement actions); external assessment (external assessors prepared an external report) and improvement plan (with the self-assessment report and the external report, the team members prepared an improvement plan), between 2003 and 2004. The purpose of this process was to evaluate the situation in each service, in order to develop a plan for improvement.

The process started with the approval of the scheme by top management. Then, the quality manager visited the services involved, in order to notify them about their participation in the process and receive their agreement to join in. Later, the academic responsible for the quality area, acting as facilitator, gave a talk to all the employees in each service, in order to help the staff to become acquainted with the quality scheme. Following this, the teams were created, and the training and self-assessment began (Fig. 2). The process finished with the external assessment and the improvement plan.

As for the improvement actions in all five services, an average of 18 actions per service was identified. Based on the self-assessment stages listed in Section 2, an analysis is made of how the self-assessment stages were implemented.

**Step 1**: Developing management commitment.

The literature illustrates how management leadership is an important factor for self-assessment in the private sector and in HEIs (Van der Wiele et al., 1996b; Davies et al., 2001; Hides et al., 2004). At Pikolinos, management commitment was obtained through the approval and communication of the process, attendance at the training course, participation in a team and support for the improvement actions. At the University of Alicante, this commitment was obtained through the approval of the plan, the written communication to each service concerning their participation in the process and the support of the improvement actions. In both cases, the commitment has caused the people that conduct the exercise to be aware of its usefulness, and has provided support for the implementation of the improvement actions.

**Step 2**: Communicating plans.

The objectives of self-assessment have to be clear to everyone involved (Samuelsson and Nilsson,
The literature suggests that a common objective of self-assessment is to identify areas for improvement (Ritchie and Dale, 2000; Sharma and Hoque, 2002; Saunders and Mann, 2005; Ford and Evans, 2006). This objective was the same for the SME and for the services at the HEI. At Pikolinos, communication with the management team, who were directly involved in the process, took place at the initial self-assessment meeting. Communication with the employees was carried out in two ways: during one of the two yearly meetings with all the employees, and through the firm’s Intranet, with a message sent to all the staff. At the University of Alicante, communication took place in two ways. First, a letter, written and signed by the top manager, was sent to the person responsible for each service; second, a talk was given to all the employees in each service. The results of this step were that the employees understood what was to be done, why, and what the purpose of the methodology was.


As has been said in Section 2, a firm may resort to various approaches. Both organisations used the workshop approach, which entails the creation of teams that meet periodically in order to identify strengths, areas for improvement and improvement actions. The result of this stage is the selection of the method for conducting self-assessment, and therefore, for the determination of the resources that may be required.

Step 4: Establishing teams and training.

In the private organisation, nine teams were created, with a total of 16 managers from all the departments. Each group consisted of four members, of which at least two belonged to the area under assessment and at least one came from outside this area. The purpose was to “mix” people who were familiar with the processes with others not belonging to the area, who would play a critical role. All belonged to the management team. Only two out of the 16 managers were acquainted with the TQM philosophy.

At the University of Alicante, each service created a team, ranging from five to seven members. None of these were aware of the existence of TQM. Some of the teams also included people from outside the service (e.g. some students, professors or even staff from outside the University of Alicante). In this case, the most common procedure is to initially bring in external members; however, these usually ended up quitting the workshops. The recommendation for managers is that they should participate in an indirect way, either by providing suggestions (for example, by means of surveys) or being invited to some of the workshops.

Training is a major component of quality management (Ishikawa, 1985; Bowen and Lawler, 1992) and it should be a priority when implementing self-assessment (Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999) because it is another way of motivating people, and a prerequisite for gaining understanding.
At Pikolinos, the training seminar for the nine groups (2 days, 19 h) was conducted by the external advisor. At the University of Alicante, the training for the five services was given by means of a 20-h course on the EFQM model and methodology, consisting of eight sessions, taught by an advisor and trainer from the ANECA. Each training session reviewed the tasks carried out in the workshops over the previous month and explained the criterion or criteria described in Fig. 2.

This training was necessary to become acquainted with the EFQM model (criteria, methodology, marking and consensus). In this way, the foundations were created to carry out a self-assessment exercise and to overcome one of the difficulties listed in the literature: not knowing where to start.

Step 5: Conducting self-assessment.

At Pikolinos, the procedure included workshops and support meetings (see Fig. 1). The former were aimed at looking for evidence on strengths, areas for improvement and improvement actions. The purpose of the support meetings was to receive the feedback from the external advisor, who would review the work done by each group.

First, several workshops were held, with each group meeting for 2 h, approximately twice a week for 2 or 3 weeks. At the end of these workshops each team had agreed on a list of strengths, areas for improvement and improvement actions, for each of the criteria allocated to the group.

Second, a support meeting took place, each group being helped by the advisor, who solved doubts and reviewed the work carried out. Each meeting lasted approximately 1.5–2 h.

Third, several workshops were held, in which the teams met again in order to improve their work by incorporating the advisor’s suggestions. As a sizeable part of the work had already been done, at this stage the teams usually got together just once a week, for 2 or 3 weeks. At the end of these workshops the team members had prepared a form reflecting a set of action plans, prioritised in order of importance ($I$) and easy implementation ($E$). The improvement actions were valued by means of the following formula, as suggested by the advisor: $7I + 3E$. These evaluation criteria were used to prioritise the improvement actions. This facilitated decision-making, for these actions could have been difficult to implement due to feasibility and cost, and it would not have been possible to execute them all at the same time.

Fourth, the groups met with the advisor again, for a second, 1-h support session, in order to examine the teams’ progress. In these support meetings, the advisors’ experience allowed them to refute, and encourage group reflection on previous decisions. This made it possible to complete the identification of strengths, areas for improvement and improvement actions that were sent to the advisor for final review. Finally, as the teams consisted of managers, the sources for the report came directly from the workshops.

At the University of Alicante, the procedure consisted of workshops and training sessions (see Fig. 2), with support from the quality area. The purpose of the workshops was that the team members should identify strengths, areas for improvement and improvement actions. The training was meant to help the team members to draft the self-assessment report every month. Finally, the quality area was responsible for processing the results of the employees’ and users’ surveys, and revising the results of the work by each team.

At the end of these workshops the team had agreed on a set of strengths, areas for improvement and improvement actions for each of the criteria; the result of these workshops was a self-assessment report. The information leading to this report was obtained from the following sources: workshops, employees and users. As for the information from employees and users, the quality area handed in three surveys to the services. There were two surveys for the employees, one based on questions from each of the criteria in the model, and the other aimed at assessing their satisfaction level; the customer surveys analysed their satisfaction level. These surveys helped the team members to gauge the employees’ perceptions on each of the criteria and the satisfaction of employees and customers. This information allowed the team members to consider other points of view when they conducted the self-assessment.

In this step, some organisations usually create groups in such a way that each of these groups assesses one or two of the nine criteria (Samuelsson and Nilsson, 2002). At Pikolinos, the criteria were distributed among the teams, whereas at the University of Alicante only some services divided up the criteria.

Step 6: Establishing action plans.

Some authors have pointed out that the establishment of an improvement plan that must be presented to higher management is a critical stage
of self-assessment (Van der Wiele et al., 1996b; Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999; Samuelsson and Nilsson, 2002). In the absence of this, the improvement actions may not be implemented, and the process is most likely to fail. At Pikolinos, there was a meeting during which each group leader gave a 10–15 min presentation of their results. This meeting allowed each group and the management to become acquainted with the results of the teams. At a later meeting, the top manager, aided by the advisor, selected and approved the action plans, which were considered a priority. This was important in order to decide which plans were to be implemented and in which order. All the improvement actions were considered, and the priority was established through the date of implementation.

At the University of Alicante, each team prepared its action plan according to the self-assessment report and the external report. As a consequence an action plan was established reflecting the improvement actions, the tasks needed to implement them, the person responsible, the deadlines, resources, financing, follow-up indicators and the person in charge of follow-up. All the actions were approved at the meeting with top management, as can be seen in step 7.

Step 7: Implementing action plans.

At Pikolinos, once the improvement plans had been approved, they became objectives integrated into strategic planning. All the actions became strategic objectives. This supports the suggestion by some authors that the plan for improvement should be included in the strategic business plan (Ritchie and Dale, 2000). Later, a meeting between the top manager and each head of department specified which actions would be performed in order to achieve these goals. The meeting ensures the commitment of each head of department towards the implementation of each plan.

At the University of Alicante, the improvement plan was approved by the top manager in a meeting with the people responsible for the service and the quality area. The result of this meeting was that commitment was ensured from both the person responsible for the service and by the top manager, regarding which actions were to be implemented.

Step 8: Review.

Firms should monitor improvement actions (Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999; Ojanen et al., 2002). At Pikolinos, the person responsible for the improvement action met with the Organisation manager every 2 months, in order to report on the degree of implementation. Then, the person responsible for Organisation reported to top management. This makes it possible to examine the degree of achievement of each goal and to analyse the difficulties that may have arisen, why it was not being fulfilled, and also to make decisions on potential actions. The result of this meeting was included in minutes, which listed any decisions made. At University of Alicante, this review consisted of periodically monitoring the degree of implementation of the actions, which could be done by the quality area and by the head of the service.

4.2. Analysis

The cases indicated that the private SME and the five public services conducted self-assessment on the basis of an existent and generic model (EFQM), considered external support to conduct it and used the workshop approach, with the aim of establishing an action plan to improve performance. This supports the idea that self-assessment can help to structure continuous improvement planning (Ritchie and Dale, 2000; Siow et al., 2001). The objective of self-assessment may influence on the amount of similarities in different stages of the analysed self-assessment process. Although there can be several purposes for self-assessment (e.g. diagnosing, improving, comparing), in these cases the objectives were quite similar in both sectors. Additionally, the objective of self-assessment in the cases analysed may promote incremental improvements. As Benner and Tushman (2003) argued, process management, a TQM-related practice like self-assessment, may promote exploitation or incremental improvements, but not exploration or radical changes in organisations. At Pikolinos, improvements are included as strategic objectives in its strategic plan, and this strategic plan may promote radical changes. At the University of Alicante, improvements promote incremental changes.

A comparison of the two sectors is offered considering three issues: the stages of self-assessment (Table 2); the difficulties and benefits; and the success factors. As for the first issue, the steps of self-assessment suggested by EFQM (2003) were developed successfully in the six cases presented here, although with some differences, namely:

- At the private firm the teams consisted of managers and at the University of Alicante they were made up of staff belonging to different
levels in the hierarchy. Consequently, there was greater participation at the University of Alicante, where additionally the staff at each service filled in EFQM questionnaires and staff satisfaction was analysed through a survey.

- The sources for the identification of strengths and areas for improvement were the workshops, i.e. the management team at the private firm and the opinion of staff and users at the University of Alicante.

- At Pikolinos the action plan included more improvement actions, and more specific ones (which may be due to the fact that only managers participate in teams), than at the University of Alicante; they become objectives included within the strategic planning, and the follow-up is made according to such planning. At Pikolinos the frequency of follow-up was 2 months, while in public services it was 1 year. These differences might be due to the differences in the organisational cultures of private and public sector organisations (e.g. related to stakeholders, legal constraints, accounting practices) (Ring and Perry, 1985; Black et al., 2001; Voss et al., 2005). For example, customer pressure is greater at Pikolinos, the accounting practices are more developed in Pikolinos and the legal constraints are higher in the five public services, which could increase the amount of bureaucracy. These issues could lead to a greater concern about strategic planning and to follow-up of objectives being carried out every 2 months at Pikolinos.

As a result, these public services may follow a process similar to those in the business sector, adapting the practices to their context. Thus, these public services may learn from the experience of the private SME. For instance, some authors have pointed out the need to include the results of self-assessment in the strategic plan (Ritchie and Dale, 2000), whereas according to others some firms conduct the process successfully without including it in the strategic plan (Eriksson, 2004). Although self-assessment may be successful by itself, as the five public administrative services have shown (and the respondents in Pikolinos argued), the benefits may be greater if this integration exists. This happens because, as was the case at Pikolinos, strategic planning and the quality system may create a continuous improvement culture, which, as a result, may facilitate the self-assessment. Conversely, this private organisation may also learn from the five public services. For example, public service self-assessment in this case is more participative, with greater emphasis on consultation and consensus, as usually happens with other practices in the public sector (MacIntosh, 2003). Thus, when low hierarchical levels take part in this exercise, the self-assessment may facilitate the learning process (Balbastre and Moreno-Luzón, 2003).

Table 2
Comparison of the cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps of self-assessment</th>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Differences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management commitment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Top manager participates in a team</td>
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<tr>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication plans</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Approach: workshop</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teams</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Made up of managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Initial (before starting self-assessment); two out of 16 managers acquainted with TQM philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting self-assessment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Made up of employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source to identify strengths and areas for improvement</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Workshops (managers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement plan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>76 improvement actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementing improvement plan</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>More specific actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Included in strategic plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Every 2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yearly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Comparison of the cases
In this respect, leadership enables the creation of this cooperative and learning context (Anderson et al., 1994; Hales and Chakravorty, 2006). As a consequence, the employees’ quality awareness is reinforced, which supplements the communication stage. Based on this idea, it can be said that more decentralised self-assessment may facilitate the development of a quality improvement culture among the employees. The propositions related to these ideas are as follows:

P1. The common self-assessment stages are the same for public services in HEIs and private sector organisations.

P2. Self-assessment practices may be adapted to the public services in HEIs context.

Based on interviews and surveys, the second issue showed similar difficulties and benefits. The lack of time and lack of commitment were the greatest difficulties in Pikolinos and the University of Alicante. The remaining difficulties suggested by the literature were recognised by the cases analysed, although their importance varied. The benefits mentioned in Section 2 were valued at the private SME and the five public services, although in reverse order of importance. In this respect, self-assessment made it possible to identify improvement actions. However, it must be emphasised that the public services attached the greatest importance to the benefits providing knowledge and awareness of quality-related issues, creating a continuous improvement approach and helping the staff to become aware of the importance of quality, whereas Pikolinos rated these as the least important. This may be due to the fact that Pikolinos already has a quality culture that has progressively developed alongside the quality system and strategic planning, and thus the self-assessment had a smaller influence these benefits. Therefore, the benefits and difficulties are similar in the private SME and in the five public services. The propositions related to the latter argument are as follows:

P3. The benefits and difficulties of self-assessment are the same for public services in HEIs and private sector organisations.

P4. The relative weight of a benefit or a difficulty depends on the quality culture existing in the organisation as well as on the objective of the whole self-assessment.

As for the success factors (third issue), they are similar in the private SME and in the five public services, according to the interviews. In this respect, the literature showed that management commitment (Van der Wiele et al., 1996b; Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999; Ritchie and Dale, 2000; Davies et al., 2001; Samuelsson and Nilsson, 2002; Ahmed et al., 2003), and the improvement plan and the follow-up (Van der Wiele et al., 1996b; Van der Wiele and Brown, 1999; Ritchie and Dale, 2000; Ojanen et al.; 2002; Samuelsson and Nilsson, 2002; Ford and Evans, 2006) are key to favourable self-assessment outcomes. In view of all this, considering the respondents’ perceptions and what has been learnt from these cases, the success factors may be identified as follows:

- Management commitment. For employees to perceive such commitment, managers must set an example, attach importance to the subject, and approve the improvement plans. This, in turn, has a positive influence another two success factors: staff involvement and the implementation and follow-up of the improvement plans.
- Communication with employees, explaining to them the aim of the whole process, at least to the teams who will perform the self-assessment. Information on the usefulness of the process was given to the team members (so that they were aware of the benefits for their respective areas) and to the rest of employees.
- Support to the team members, providing training, data and a review of the tasks done.

Therefore, the following propositions are put forward:

P5. Management commitment is related to successful self-assessment in public services in HEIs and private sector organisations.

P6. The improvement plan and follow-up are related to successful self-assessment in public services in HEIs and private sector organisations.

P7. Communication with employees and support to the teams are related to successful self-assessment in public services in HEIs and private sector organisations.

Based on these ideas, although the cases showed differences, the EFQM model and the same process is applicable to the private SME and the five public services. This does not mean that, for example,
HEIs should adopt all private practices. There are contextual differences between the two sectors and the practices require an intelligent adaptation.

5. Conclusions

The results show that HEIs may adopt business practices, but these must be adapted to their own context. Although in the cases differences were found between the private firm and the five public administrative services, the findings showed that the same model (EFQM) and the same methodology are applicable to the private SME and the five public services. However, private managerial practices need to be adapted to the public services and also, the private organisation may learn from HEIs, for example, regarding increased employee participation. Thus, the results do not imply that one sector may adopt the other’s practices as a matter of routine, but rather that these practices need to be adapted to their environment in both HEIs and the private sector.

This paper has highlighted a number of key similarities and differences in order to answer the three research questions related to the stages for self-assessment (research question 1) difficulties, benefits (research question 2) and success factors (research question 3). In relation to the stages for self-assessment, the differences are related to employee participation, which was greater in HEIs (because employees participate in teams), and the higher quality level at the private firm (because it already had a quality system based on the ISO standard and a strategic plan that had created a culture of continuous improvement). Regarding the areas of similarity, these include that the steps for self-assessment were developed successfully in the cases analysed, and therefore it appears that self-assessment is equally attractive to public services managers. Concerning the difficulties, the benefits and the success factors, they were, in general, similar in the cases analysed, but with varying degrees of importance, due to contextual differences.

These findings show that HEIs may successfully develop self-assessment processes if they comply with all the stages suggested by EFQM (2003), and, therefore, the success factors are present. The contribution from this paper provides support to the existing literature dealing with these issues in the private organisations, and expands the empirical literature about these issues in HEIs, as they have not been explored much in public organisations. Moreover, although it is not possible to extrapolate case studies to the general population, this paper reports advances in theory and application presenting a critical review. It provides further insights in theory development about self-assessment in HEIs.

Finally, this study is subject to some limitations, namely, the difficulty to extrapolate and the researcher’s bias. The latter has been reduced by means of triangulation. As for generalisations, the study represents a private SME and five public administrative services and the ability to generalise findings across countries and cultures is very limited. It may illustrate similarities and differences useful for other managers of both sectors. Greater insights may be developed from replication in a wider range of countries and with a wider variety of public organisations. Then, a quantitative study could test the propositions identified from this study. Future researchers should collect large samples of empirical data on self-assessment in public and private sectors for further comparison.

References


